

Promoting Student Engagement with PeerWise

The following are some factors which we feel are important to the successful implementation of a PeerWise component in a course. Some may be peculiar to our own educational context, but we believe them to be worth considering nonetheless: these are things which (appeared to) work for us.

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Cognitive Scaffolding

This is probably the most significant driver of high-quality student submissions: the students need to be engaged with the task, be in the right mindset, and be clearly informed of what standard is expected of them. We have a number of resources which we have used for these purposes in an introductory workshop session. Any hands-on time you have with students should most profitably be spent on this type of activity: by its nature, this can (and maybe should) be done off-line – there's no need to try to obtain time in a computer lab, any workshop space should be fine. Don't waste precious hands-on time with 'how to log on' or 'which buttons do what' – PeerWise is very discoverable and students are very tech savvy. In any case there are plenty of screencasts and documentation available to cover this. If there's one thing students should take from an introductory session, it's an expectation of high quality standards: a suitably 'stretching' example question is probably good for this.

Summative Assessment

Most students are at least partially strategic: it's an uphill struggle to get them to engage with an 'extra' thing which doesn't 'count for anything'. We have had good engagement for as little as 1-3% of course credit, so it doesn't have to be a major element. The PeerWise scoreboard system can be used for this (and is good in that it directly uses peer scoring, and rewards high quality contributions and useful discussions) but not in its raw form as it is highly non-linear: we have algorithms which we have used successfully to derive suitably-scaled assignment marks from scoreboard performance.

Appropriate Deadlines

In our experience, don't expect students to contribute much after the assignment deadline passes: to keep engagement healthy, leave the deadline until near the end of the course, or have sub-deadlines distributed across the semester.

Make sure the students are aware of the scoring system

The scoreboard scores are dominated by peer marks: students can only obtain these if their peers have attempted their questions and rated them. Early adopters benefit greatly, and (unlike most coursework) you simply cannot leave it to the last minute: questions submitted 10 minutes before the deadline won't be seen by anyone and will gather hardly any ratings. It is essential that students realise they must get active early to get full benefit. Similarly, make it clear that assessment is not based on the raw scoreboard performance: due to its non-linearity, some students can become alarmed when they only have a few hundred points and the class leader has a few thousand.

Make sure your whole course team is on board

Students are very sensitive to the attitudes of lecturers, class leaders and tutors. Try to encourage your course team to be positive (regardless of what they might actually think) – staff members being dismissive, excessively sceptical or portraying the system as a 'toy' or gimmick will probably harm student engagement.

Give the students ownership of the space

It's not a bad idea to monitor the system (questions and comments) by observing, but as far as possible leave the students to it. In particular, resist the urge to point out or correct wrong questions: in our experience, wrong questions are identified and corrected rapidly by the students in almost all cases. The disadvantages of any remaining wrong questions are probably outweighed by the freedom students feel in not having tutors 'looking over their shoulder': we are asking the students to be very creative, and it would be a shame to inhibit that with heavy-handed interventions. Similarly, social and etiquette problems tend to be community-moderated acceptably without staff intervention.